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FILM

'Sanctus' and 'Lot of Sodom'

A Renaissance Man Gets His Due

Local director finds an odd film maker

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CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

PHYSICIAN, inventor, publisher and film maker, James Sibley Watson Jr. was a true Renaissance man whose accomplishments, oddly enough, have never given him the fame he deserves.

As a physician and radiologist, Watson refined a motion-picture camera that captured X-ray images of human beings and their internal organs in motion.

As an editor and publisher, Watson ran *The Dial*, a progressive literary magazine that published W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, and introduced poets Marianne Moore and e.e. cummings to an audience of post-World War I intellectuals.

As a film maker, Watson (1896-1982) occupies a stranger footnote. Although he was a married man, politically conservative and the heir to a huge family fortune, Watson was a pioneer in experimental, avant-garde cinema who made two deliciously unconventional and erotic films — "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1929) and "Lot in Sodom" (1933).

According to local film maker Barbara Hammer, who stumbled upon Watson's cinematic experiments two years ago, Watson was a true original — a ground-breaking artist who's never gotten his due.

On Thursday, in a San Francisco Cinematheque program at the S.F. Art Institute, Hammer will show "Lot in Sodom," as well as her own film "Sanctus," a fanciful, 19-minute film that she made after retooling Watson's old X-ray footage. In a sense, the pair of films constitutes an unexpected union of creative spirits — spanning 60 years and occurring nine years after Watson's death.

Made at the University of Rochester in New York, where Watson was a radiologist at Strong Memorial Hospital, "Lot in Sodom" depicts the Old Testament story of the prophet Lot and his flight from the decadent village of Sodom. Shot in a converted barn, with a nonprofessional cast that Watson recruited from his family, friends and the Rochester community, "Lot" is startling in its use of abstract and erotic imagery.

Headlessly wed to a life of pleasure, the men of Sodom dance about half-naked — wearing thick eye makeup and what appear to be terry cloth towels — frolicking, leaping and spinning in a frenzy of extended bliss. Watson shoots them with chiaroscuro lighting, an affect that recalls both the German Expressionist films of Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau, and the early Hollywood glamour photography of George Hurrell.

By contrast, Lot, his family and the village elders are dressed in sackcloths, smothered in fake beards, and portrayed as dreary, frowning killjoys — clearly indicating Watson's own preference for free expression over piety and denial.

According to Hammer, a lesbian, "Lot in



BY VINCENT MASCIGLIA/THE CHRONICLE

"Sodom" can easily be interpreted as a gay film. "Watson was not gay," she says, "but he worked with gay people a lot. Melville Webber, who co-directed 'Lot in Sodom' [and 'The Fall of the House of Usher'] was gay, and so was Scofield Thayer, who edited *The Dial* with Watson."

In the recently published "Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film," author Richard Dyer agrees with Hammer. "[The film] shows Sodom destroyed for its gayness and thus may appear morally conventional, but it feels like a celebration of gayness."

Sexuality aside, Watson's passion for film making — his zest for finding poetry in a traditionally straightforward medium — is evident in each frame. Images spill forth, some striking, some kitschy, as if Watson couldn't stem his creative flow: A woman giving birth is represented by flowers opening and doves flying; a rain of fire falls from the sky to destroy a model of Sodom; dancing men are seen in double and triple exposure — an effect that Watson created through multiple printing.

Curiously, Hammer says, despite its homoerotic, Bacchanalian imagery, and its use of partial nudity, "Lot in Sodom" was never targeted by censorship advocates. "It was shown in New York City [in 1933] at the Times Theater," she says. "No scandal, no censorship."

"NOBODY noticed it," says Watson's second wife, Nancy Watson Dean, who still lives in Rochester, in the 22-room mansion that Watson called home for 60 years. "Isn't that strange? I don't know why. Maybe because he didn't push it or copyright it. He just let it float."

According to Dean, 75, who was married to Watson from 1977 to his death in 1982, her husband rarely looked at "Lot in Sodom" or "Fall of the House of Usher" in his later years. "He called them his 'entertainment films.' He did so many things: He made commercial films for Eastman Kodak and Bausch and Lomb, which are still shown. They're works of art; he couldn't do anything without making it a work of art."

Dean remembers Watson as a man of contradictions — a shy recluse who preferred working alone in his attic, but who

Barbara Hammer at home and James Sibley Watson Jr.: She uncovered his early unconventional and erotic films



nonetheless exuded a potent personal charm. "I've never known such a magnetic person," she says. "Very sensual, very handsome, even when he was in his 80s. A very mysterious man. Very subterranean and psychic, as if he got messages constantly that were neither spoken or written."

For Hammer, 51, who's made more than 50 experimental films and videos of her own since 1967, the interest in Watson began in 1989, when she attended the National Alliance of Media Arts Conference in Rochester, N.Y., and saw Watson's films for the first time.

"I was astounded to find an American avant-garde film maker of the '20s who was so little known to me. His use of prisms, filters, sets, optical design without reliance on a narrative background, all furthered my interest in learning more about Watson and his work."

The day after she saw the films, Hammer and a group of film makers requested a tour of the archives at the George Eastman House in Rochester, one of the largest film archives in the country. Passing through a roomful of aging film reels, Hammer stopped to examine several cans that were labeled "Watson's X-Rays."

"I lifted the lid off one of the cans and

saw that the film was 35mm," Hammer recalls. "I very much wanted to see all of this footage on a screen. The desire to see what hasn't been seen or is forbidden to be seen has been a long-standing compulsion for me."

What Hammer found, during a viewing session that lasted three days, was a series of motion-picture X-rays that Watson and his colleagues filmed at the University of Rochester. The footage, which Hammer believes hadn't been seen in 20 years ("I had to re-spool them to look at them"), unlocked a bizarre, poetic, occasionally repulsive world.

"I found images," she says, "of men shaving; shaking hands, playing musical instruments. I saw a doctor examining a patient with a stethoscope, fluids flowing through intestines, someone putting on lipstick and another skeleton sensuously rubbing a hand over a face."

Reworking Watson's original X-ray footage with an optical printer, Hammer created "Sanctus," an eerie meditation on the human body, its intricacy and fragility. In a grant proposal written prior to the making of the film, Hammer described her interest in X-ray footage: "I find the skeletal structure of the human figure an exquisite, integral manifestation of form and necessity."

If there's a creative or biographical parallel between Watson and Hammer, it's the sense of play and creative adventure they both bring to film making. To make the Watson footage come alive, Hammer ran each shot through her optical printer three times, adding different colors to each run through.

She also experimented with developing sections of the film in her bathtub and treating it with bleach to enhance the sense of aging. Finally, she commissioned a musical score from Neil R. Rolnick, who incorporated themes from the sacred masses of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven.

Originally, Hammer called her film "Dr. Watson's X-Rays," but changed it to "Sanctus" to evoke a spirit of wonder and mystery that's inside of us yet outside our understanding. "The title gives you a sense of the fragility of the body and the sanctity of life," she explains.

Hammer, who won the recent James D. Phelan award for her work in video, said she spent six months shooting "Sanctus" and two months marrying the footage to Rolnick's score. In addition to presenting her film and "Lot in Sodom" at the Art Institute, Hammer will also show "Dr. Watson's X-Rays," a 22-minute video documentary she compiled from interviews with Watson surviving family and colleagues.

HAMMER'S passion for Watson didn't fade after the making of "Sanctus," however. "I'm writing a grant proposal to raise money for another film," she says. "I want to use the outtakes from 'Lot in Sodom' to make a sensual gay man's film. I'm not sure what I'll call it: either 'Lots of Sodom' or 'Sodom's Lot.'"

Why isn't Watson remembered today? According to Dean, it may have been by design. Instead of aspiring to immortality, as so many artists do, her reclusive husband longed for obscurity — in life and in death. "As his friend Kenneth Burke said to him, 'Well Sibley, you always wanted nobody to know you were there and now you got your wish.'"